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FEBRUARY

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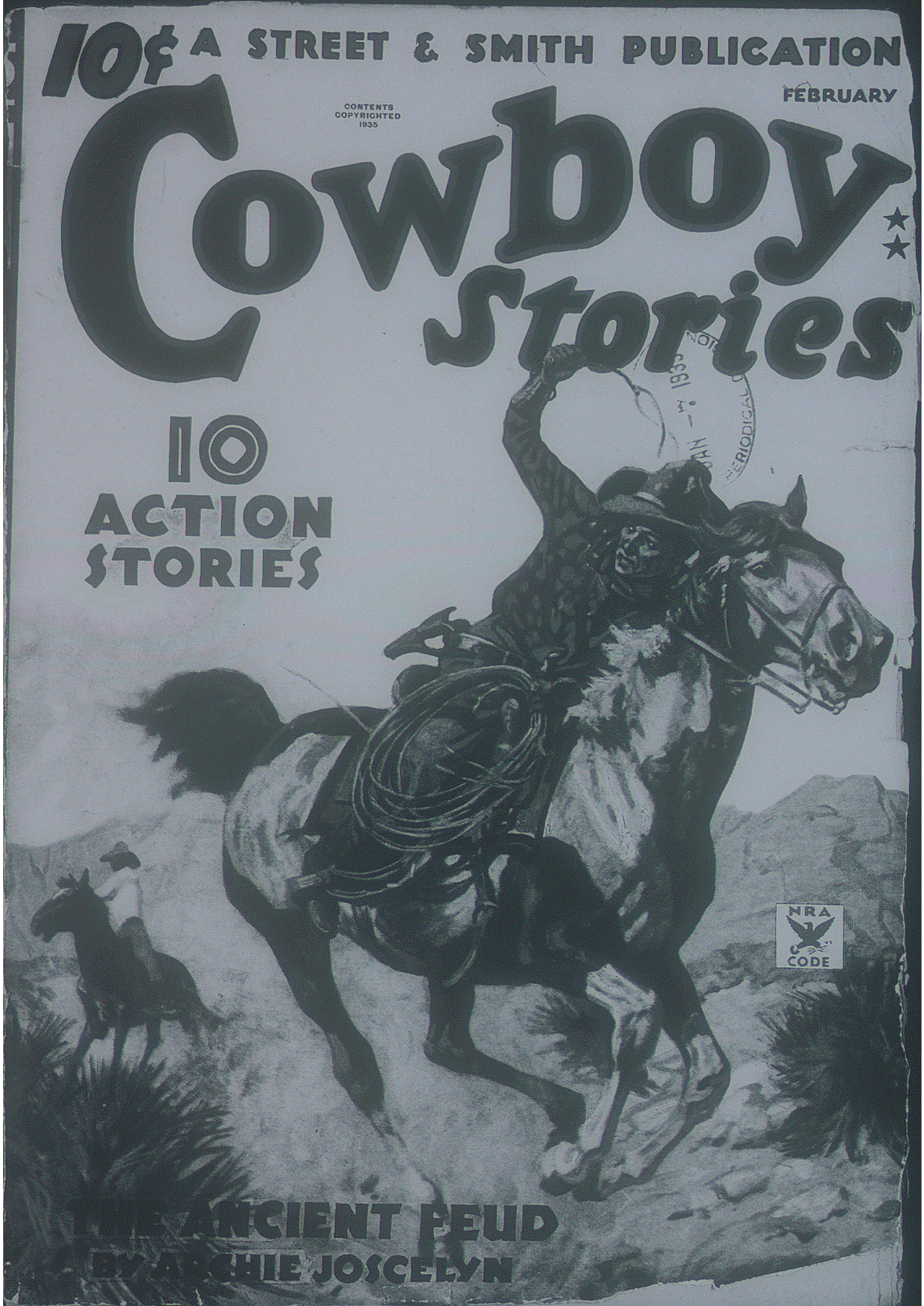
Cowboy Stories

10 ACTION STORIES



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ANCIENT FEUD

BY ARCHIE JOSCELYN

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Cowboy Stories

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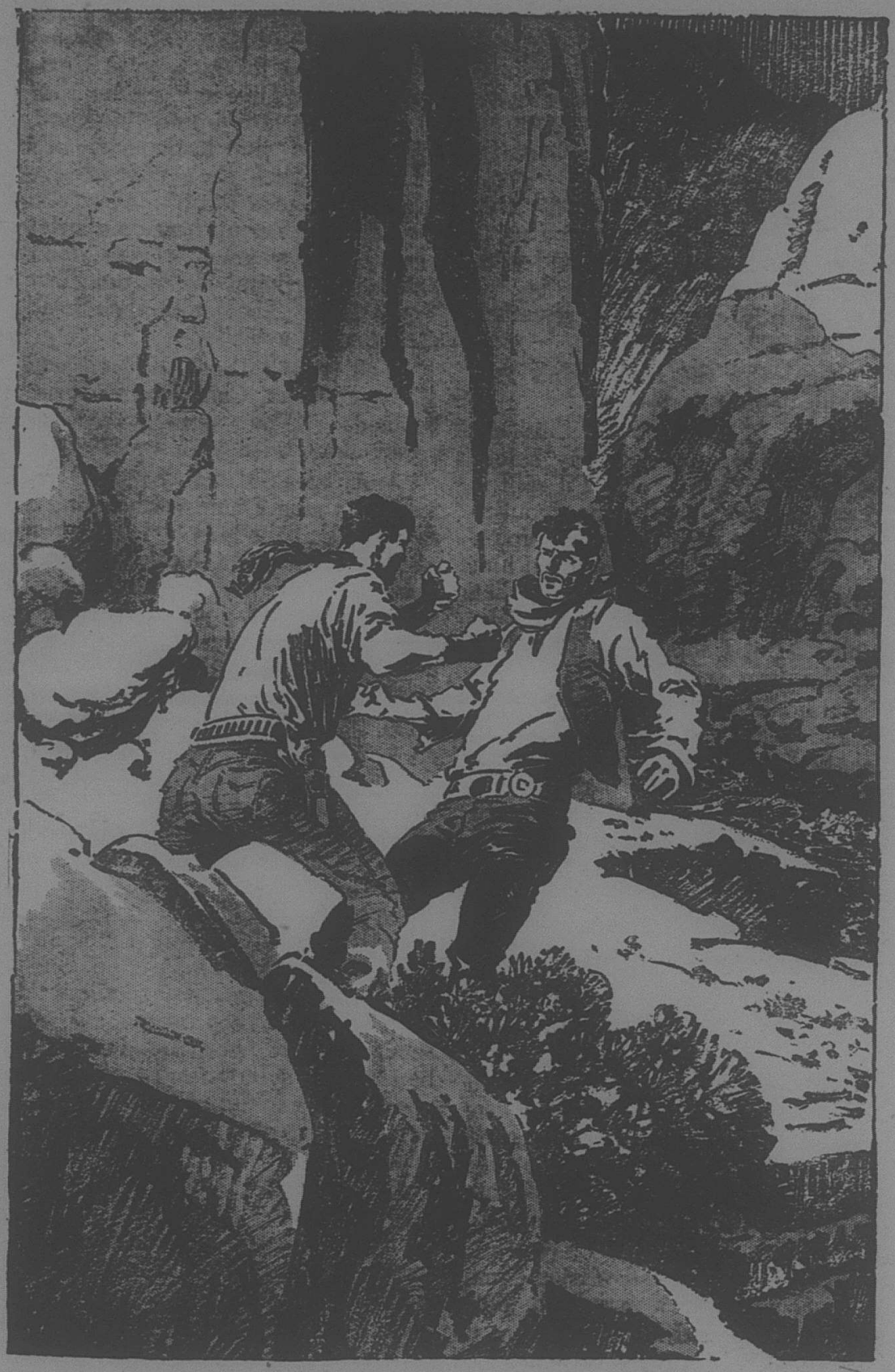

Murder for Sale

A furious salvo of fists drove him back—back—back toward death!

by Robert D. Stelle

GLINTS of sardonic humor lurked far back in Hank Ellison's gray eyes as he watched old Tim Harahan squirm in his chair. For one who owned and ran an East Side New York saloon, who had grown up in the old West, and who numbered among his close personal friends men ranging from down-and-out prize fighters to no less a personage than Judson Sperry, reputed to be the coldest-blooded banker in New York City, this evidence of Tim's uneasiness was decidedly out of the ordinary.

Add to these things the affection which shone in his honest blue eyes as he regarded the saturnine-visaged Hank, and it was an easy guess that something decidedly out of the ordinary was in the making.

"You say that you, Jud Sperry, and this here Jerry Baker's dad used to be buddies out in Arizona?" Hank asked.

"Yes, Hank; an' damn fine buddies they were. They be them as says Jud ain't got no heart, Hank, but they don't know him at all, at all. 'Tis only to hide a tender heart that he's made himself seem to be what he ain't. Why, Hank, I mind when——"

"Uh, huh!" Hank grunted, interrupting Tim's intended rhapsody with the rudeness of a time-tested friend. "I'll take your word for it, and if he's a friend of yours, he's one of mine, but I ain't so keen on this Jerry bozo.

"You say Sperry's done everything possible for him, and he's turned out a bum, mixed up with racketeers, dope peddlers, and what-not. And not only that, but that he seems to have no disposition to change. What in blazes makes you think I can straighten him out?"

"You're the court of last appeal, Hank. If you can't do it, it can't be done. Huh! Damn it all, Hank, ever since you got old John Goodman, down in Texas, outa——"

"That was different. I owe John and Maw Goodman lots more than I can ever repay, and I wouldn't give a damn for any fellow who don't try to pay his debts. That's why I can't stir up any sweat over this Jerry hombre."

"To hell with Jerry!" Tim exploded, his eyes suddenly frosty. "So far as I'm concerned, 'tis dead I'd rather see him than disgracin' the memory of Jack Baker, than whom no better man ever shared his tarp with his friends, to say nothin' of what he's doin' to Jud," he stormed. "'Tis a dirty, stinkin' shame, it is, an' 'tis only because of Jack's memory, an' my friendship for Jud, that I'm askin' this of you, in the name of friendship, Hank."

"Have you said anything to Sperry about this?" Hank demanded abruptly.

Once more, Tim squirmed as he rasped his stubbly chin against the grain with his hamlike hand.

"Aw, hell! Yes, Hank; I did, an' I told him that if you done anything, 'twould be only because of your friendship for me you'd do it, too."

Hank's jaws snapped shut. The wily Tim had said exactly the right thing.

"Then I'll do my best, Tim. It's a damned poor excuse for a man who'll let down his friends, but if this Jerry's the kind of a polecat you say he is, I make no promises as to the outcome. You say Sperry still owns his ranch?"

"Yes."

"All right!" Hank announced abruptly. "Phone Sperry that I'm coming up to see him, pronto, but that I'll have nothing to do with it, unless he agrees to do exactly what

I say, and lets me handle it in my own way. I've got a scheme to find out just how low this skunk really is, then I'll cure or kill him. But if he's what I think he is, don't blame me if he gets hung."

"I'll do it," agreed Tim with alacrity, "although I've already told him you'd work no other way. An', Hank, if you need any money——"

"Money don't enter into it, Tim," Hank interrupted, rather gruffly, although he smiled into Tim's unusually red face. "I don't serve my friends for pay."

" 'Tis only too well I know it, Hank, but I'd not have you out a cent. 'Tis agin' my grain to ask my friends to spend money for me for friendship's sake."

Hank chuckled softly as he got to his feet and slapped Tim on the back. "Then we're even, old hoss. Now, strut your stuff."

"Be gob, 'tis sorry I am for Jud an' Jerry both. Ah well, 'tis as Hank said, a case of kill or cure, an' may the devil take the hindmost!"

IF JUDSON SPERRY was other than the human icicle he was reputed to be, nothing of it showed as he sat facing Jerry Baker. With his gray hair brushed straight back, and his cold eyes staring unblinkingly from beneath their beetling brows, which angled upward from his long and predatory nose, he looked not unlike an eagle, and his emotionless face seemed no less relentless.

Unshaven and pallid, his puffy, watery eyes red-rimmed, and his clothes ruffled and mussed, as if he had been sleeping in them, Jerry strove to restrain the twitching of his face and the trembling of his hands. Despite his six feet, broad shoulders, and rather stubborn jaw, dissipation had so loosened the muscles of his face that every vestige of character had been destroyed, and, for a moment, Sperry seemed to find it hard to speak.

"You are the flabbiest imitation of a good man that I have ever seen, Jerry. For three years, now, ever since you became of age, you have done about every possible reprehensible thing to drag in the mud the reputation of the man whose name you bear. You have squandered every available dollar of his hard-earned money. I have given you hundreds from my own pocket, besides, and, once more, you have come here, unbidden and in spite of my having told you never to darken my door again." He did not add that Jerry had beaten him to it by only an hour or so.

"I'd not be here if it was not absolutely necessary. I have to get three thousand dollars." Jerry's voice held a slight tremor.

"I've given you the last cent I shall ever throw away upon you. You're not worth it. When he was your age, your father——"

"Yes, I know all about that," Jerry half snarled. "You two were rustling cattle and raising hell."

"You lie! Your father and I earned honestly every dollar we owned when we came here after your mother's death. I've done more for you than I would have for a son of my own. I'm through."

"B-but you've got to help me," Jerry persisted desperately. "If I fail to get it by to-night, I'll be put on the spot. If—if you'll do this for me, I'll promise to leave New York and never bother you again. I—I know I've been rotten——"

"Yes; you *are* rotten, so rotten that I do not doubt that you would even commit murder for money."

"Yes; I'm not so sure that I wouldn't. It's do or die with me. I'm desperate."

Judson Sperry's eyes bored into his tragic ones, his tongue flicking across his grim lips.

"I—I believe it. For once, I believe that you are telling the truth. Yes; at last you have reached the stage of depravity where you would murder for money."

Aside from the dry cracking of the knuckles of his tightly clenched fists, Sperry evinced no emotion. "Will you kill a man for me?" he demanded abruptly.

The room suddenly became so still that Jerry fancied he could hear the ticking of the older man's watch. His own was long since gone. Then a dull roaring came into his head.

"Y-yes." Jerry's voice sounded strange to his own ears, his tongue feeling too large for his mouth.

"All right! I'll pay this three thousand dollars for you and give you an additional three thousand when I have proof of the murder. Understand me, Jerry; I am in deadly earnest. I am offering to pay you to commit murder."

"N-name the man."

Unheeded, the sweat ran into Jerry's eyes as he spoke, and, for the first time during the interview, Judson Sperry's face betrayed emotion as he sank back into his chair and wiped his forehead.

"Are—are you just plain drunk or full of hop, Jerry? I—I didn't believe that a son of your father could ever sink so low."

"Neither. I'll kill your man." Having made his decision, Jerry was determined to brazen it through. "You've always bragged to me about your iron determination and power of decision. Now, name your man." He finished with a sneer.

Sperry's jaw set, and he stiffened abruptly. "I shall name no names," he snapped. "You will take to-morrow morning's train for Dry Sink, Arizona. From there, you will go to the Bee-in-a-Box Ranch and kill its owner. It will not be easy—unless you are coward enough to shoot him in the back, like your gangster friends.

"I shall give you just seven months in which to do it, in case your first attempt fails and you have to make another try. If you succeed, you may come back here—or go to hell. If you fail, my advice to you is to start going and never stop, for I shall hire another to finish the job—and you.

"Meet me here at nine to-morrow morning, when I shall give you the tickets and enough expense money to get you there. The rest is up to you. Now give me the name and address of the man to whom you owe the three thousand and get out of my sight."

JERRY BAKER was the only passenger to alight from the Limited as it ground to a panting stop to disgorge him. Wan and shaky from his enforced abstinence during the trip, there was nothing reassuring to him in the appearance of Dry Sink.

Its one street passed straight through its group of false-fronted buildings and vanished into the simmering desert beyond. In spite of the withering heat, a cold chill ran up Jerry's back, and he shuddered visibly as he stood watching the train fade into the hazy distance.

"Climate a mite cool for you, stranger?"

Jerry wheeled to find himself facing the six-foot, lean, saturnine-faced man whose drawling voice had so startled him.

"N-no! I'm just shaking for the drinks. Is it always this hot here?"

"Shore is, only sometimes it gets hotter. C'mon an' we'll see if we can't rustle up a drink. It's right dry around these parts."

After the fifth glass of the raw, strangling fluid which passed for whisky in Dry Sink, Jerry began to feel more like himself and things assumed a more roseate hue. The face of the stranger, which, at first, had seemed hard and repelling, now appeared more friendly.

"My name's Jerry—Jerry Baker."

"Glad to know you, Jerry. Mine's Bill Burley. I run the Rockin' R spread. Have another snort."

WHEN JERRY awoke the following morning, with a splitting head and his mouth and throat afire, he had only a sketchy impression of what had happened the night before. In fact, everything after that sixth drink was vague and nebulous, but he had not finished dressing before he was made painfully aware of at least some of the events, for Bill Burley slammed open the door of his room—a grim, hard-faced Bill.

"Get goin', feller! Since you can't pay the five hundred you lost last night, you can just come out to the Rockin' R an' work it out at forty per. You damn tinhorns seem to think you can come out here an' get away with murder. Shake a leg!"

At the word "murder," Jerry winced perceptibly, but if Burley noticed it at all, he evidently attributed it to Jerry's condition. Indeed, Jerry was a pitiable sight, but the seemingly easy-going Bill Burley of the night before had now become a pitiless handler of "salty" men.

"Five hundred dollars!" Jerry gasped.

"Yeah; an' don't pull none of that baby stuff by sayin' you was drunk an' didn't know what you was doin'. Here's your I O U's, an' you can shore handle more likker than any feller I ever knowed. Well, you'll be apt to wait a spell before you lap up any more. At forty per, it's gonna be a good year before you do any more fancy drinkin'."

Something in Burley's sneering tone, or because his raw nerves were shrieking, caused Jerry's temper to flare up, and he launched a surprisingly swift blow at Bill's chin.

With the speed of light, Burley evaded the blow, and, a split second later, a bomb seemed to burst in Jerry's head as Bill's rocklike fist crashed against the point of his chin, lifting him to his toes and sending him crashing across a chair, which promptly resolved itself into kindling wood.

Letting out a bellow, Jerry, once a star half back and champion varsity boxer, was on his feet, but, with seemingly little effort, Burley drove home two short but wicked uppercuts, and Jerry went down for the count, wondering dumbly just how it had all happened.

Even in his befuddled state, he realized that he had gone up against a real fighter and that, for all his seeming slenderness, Bill Burley was made of whang and whalebone, packing in each fist a wallop that would have taken him far in the boxing profession.

Groggily, Jerry gamely struggled to his knees, shaking his head to clear his vision, but his abused body refused to respond to his will, and, with a groan, he collapsed inertly.

With surprising ease, Burley picked him up bodily and tossed him upon the bed, which hit the wall with a bang and screeched its protest as Jerry's two hundred and twenty pounds landed.

Spluttering, Jerry's next consciousness was one of clammy dis-

comfort, then realization came that Burley was dousing him liberally with the water from the cracked pitcher on the washstand.

"If you want any more, feller, just tie your dawg loose," Burley growled. "They's plenty more where it come from, hombre. If you've got a bellyful, c'mon an' le's eat."

II.

BURLEY paid for the breakfast, which, aside from the alkaline coffee that he gulped down avidly, Jerry could not eat, and they were a good three miles from town before Burley relented enough to give him the last drink from a pint bottle.

This helped a little, but before they reached the Rocking R, Jerry was a wreck. Soft, weakened from his dissolute life, unaccustomed to riding horseback, and sick from his previous night's spree, to say nothing of his treatment at Bill's hands, he was unable to stand on his feet when, at last, he half fell from his horse at the ranch.

Profanely, Burley helped him into the bunk house where he left him to his misery, and it was dusk before he was aroused by the arrival of the punchers who worked there.

It was with difficulty that Jerry managed to eat that night. Not only was he downright sick, but his painful jaws reminded him eloquently of the hitting powers of the flint-faced Burley.

Resentment flared in Jerry's heart, but the evident respect in which these hard-bitten, rough-and-ready punchers held Burley warned him to keep his ideas to himself.

"But, believe you me, gentlemen," he said—mentally, of course—"I'm going to beat the head off that guy when I get my feet back under me."

As if clearly aware of exactly what was in Jerry's mind, Burley's icy eyes surveyed his battered face, and he smiled sardonically.

DAYLIGHT, the following morning, found the punchers boisterously joshing one another as they got into their clothes, their profane objurgations awakening Jerry.

His first impulse was to shout for them to quiet down and let him sleep, but a glimmer of intelligence warned him of its inadvisability. Then it began to dawn upon him that, while these men joked and kidded one another unmercifully, none of them paid him the slightest heed.

Despite his misery, this quickly began to get under his skin. Jerry Baker, whatever his other shortcomings, was not one accustomed to being ignored, and his resentment for Bill Burley's high-handed methods began to mount with each fleeting moment.

With a smothered grunt, he twisted over in his hard bunk, turning his back to the crowd. Thus it was that he was spared the further humiliation of seeing the knowing winks that passed between the punchers and the contemptuous manner in which they eyed him as they passed outside.

With a sigh of relief, Jerry was just dropping off to sleep when a rough hand snatched off his blankets, and he found himself jerked out, landing upon the rough board floor with a thud.

"Say, you lily-livered pup! What d'you think this here place is? Some ladies' eelymonisary? Get goin'! Them as stays on the Rockin' R, works."

His throbbing head and the penetrating chill of the keen morning air caused Jerry to smother the protests that sprang to his lips and to strug-

gle into his clothes, while Burley, with a wicked glint in his eyes, strode out to join the men.

"AW, HELL! Honest to gran'ma, Burley, whyn't you pick on some other ranny to dry-nurse him?" stormed "Rusty" Dolan, so named from the color of his unruly hair. "I don't hone——" But catching the look in Burley's eye, he abruptly switched his tune. "Awrite, dammit, but jest don't ast me to close-herd him in town, or where anybody can see me."

Burley grinned at the disgusted puncher. "Don't fret none, Rusty. You'll get your reward in heaven, an'," turning to the grinning punchers clustered about him, "don't none of you bozos think this gives you no cause to ride Rusty's hump, an' that's whatever. I told you what was to be done, an' you all know that goes as she lays." Then Burley headed for the house.

"Phew!" whistled "Shorty" McCabe, the six-foot-four straw boss. "If you asts me, that there Bill Burley's one salty hombre, an', as for me, I'm doin' jest what he says, an' no questions ast. I was sore, at fust, when he blowed in here with orders from the Ol' Man, but I got an idee they's more to this than appears on the surface.

"Get goin', bozos. There goes the gong," he added, as "Windy" Jones, the ranch cook, hammered vigorously upon the old iron wagon tire that served as the official dinner bell.

With a sigh, Rusty remained behind to take up his onerous task, secretly determined to get what fun he could from the job, but as Jerry emerged from the bunk house, something in his eyes caused Rusty to revise part of his program.

"By golly," he confided to his cronies later, "I didn't know that there buzzard was quite so dog-gone big, an' believe me Hanner, they's more to him'n mush."

To Jerry's surprise, he found the big, rawboned, fiery-headed puncher awaiting him to be not at all unfriendly.

"Me, I'm Rusty Dolan, but jest call me Rusty. Burley says your name's Jerry. We don't do no 'misterin' ' around here, to speak of. Boy! Them's shore swell duds you're wearin', Jerry. Howsomever, they ain't no good for workin'. An' I reckon you ain't got no hawg-leg, nor nothin'."

"Hog-leg?" Jerry repeated uncertainly.

"Shore! Six-gun, shootin' iron, .45, revolver, I reckon you calls it. Well, I'll get you one from Burley, only jest don't try shootin' it none till we gets out in the hills. An' I reckon, mebby, you can wear Shorty's clothes by turnin' up the pants a foot or so. Well, wash your face, feller, or them hawgs'll of et everything before we gets our feet under the trough."

III.

FIVE of the seven months passed —five months of life as hard and grueling as Bill Burley could make it.

"I'll bet I've dug a million post holes and strung a thousand miles of barbed wire," Jerry commented to his pony, ruefully inspecting his calloused and sinewy hands.

But he was a changed man. Hard as nails, browned by the relentless Arizona sun, and his heritage of normal manhood restored and developed by the rigors of his work and enforced abstinence from all dissipation, he had undergone a remarkable metamorphosis.

In the beginning, the men themselves had seen to it that every possible disagreeable job had fallen to his lot, from wrangling the remuda to chopping wood and washing the dishes for Windy. Still, just when it seemed that physical endurance could stand no more, Rusty always managed to save the day by some little act or word of encouragement.

On this particular morning, Jerry was riding with Rusty, for whom he had begun to feel a real friendship, despite those early days when, as Jerry now realized, he had pulled upon him most of the time-honored range pranks.

There was just one outstanding fly in Jerry's ointment—he still harbored a deep-seated desire for one more chance to even up his score with Bill Burley. The more he had thought about his treatment that first hectic morning, the deeper grew his desire for revenge.

Nor had it been lessened as he had mulled it over under the broiling Arizona sun while digging countless post holes in the rock-hard adobe soil. Like a canker, it had grown and festered until it had become an obsession.

"Believe me," he grumbled to Rusty, and without any preliminary beating around the bush as they ambled into the hills, "I certainly am going to beat off Burley's head one of these days."

"Still sore because he lammed you a couple?" asked Rusty noncommittally.

"Yes," Jerry snapped, squaring his shoulders. "Any man who'd hit a poor, half-drunk fellow shaking with the jitters is nothing but a dirty coward."

For a long moment, Rusty studied Jerry's bitter, determined face. "Well, Jerry, she's your funeral, but if it was me, I'd think twice before I tried it. Now, I don't aim to discourage you none, feller. You handles yourself like you knowed your onions, but I'm tellin' you, Bill Burley's one damn tough hombre to mess with. Huh!

"Didn'tcha never notice how Shorty does perzackly what Burley tells him, even to pitchin' hay last month? Jest take it from me, Jerry, any man as can make Shorty McCabe pitch hay without grousin', jest by lookin' at him, ain't no jasper to monkey with, not no time!

"Why, I seen Shorty lick three Turkey Claw waddies, single-handed, an' never bat an eye, but you notices he ain't crowdin' Burley none—an' it ain't 'cause he's boss, neither. Hell! Shorty can get as good a job on any ranch in Coconino County, jest for the askin'.

"Nope, Jerry, that there Bill Burley's jest nacher'ly a good feller to leave alone, so if you hones to mix with him, jest count me outa the pitcher. Yes, siree! An' shoot! You'd orta see that jasper sling a gun! If you're set on takin' him on, be shore you ain't carryin' your hawg-leg. You can get over a beatin', but lead piznin's plumb fatal.

"Well, see you later. Here's where I turns off. An' say! You was askin' me where the Bee-in-a-Box was. See them buildin's off to the west? That's it."

"Thanks, Rusty; and who's the fellow that owns it?"

Rusty reined in his horse. "Jerry, the skunk as owns that ranch is so low he could walk under a snake's belly with his hands in the air an' not touch nothin'. Me, I ain't so dang p'tic'lar, but I wouldn't foul my mouth by namin' him."

Setting his spurs to his pony, Rusty was gone with a clatter and

soon was hidden in the accompanying cloud of dust.

FOR SEVERAL minutes, Jerry sat staring after his departing friend.

"Yes; he's my friend," he said softly, "and I'm mighty proud to admit it, but why the devil won't anybody tell me who owns that ranch? Damn it all! If I could only get away from this hell hole, I'll bet I could find somebody who'd tell me. And if he's any lower than Bill Burley, damn his soul, he ought to be killed.

"H-m-m! Now I just wonder if——"

But as he glanced around, he could scarcely repress a snort of disgust. As always, less than a quarter of a mile away, was one of the Rocking R boys, mounted upon Blue Blazes, one of the fleetest, if most vicious, horses on the ranch.

With a shrug and a sigh of resignation, Jerry gave up his half-formed idea of escaping and started on to his work. Not once had he been out of sight of some of the Rocking R men, and, as he had come to realize, always mounted upon a horse that could run the legs off anything he himself was ever permitted to ride. It was only too clearly evident that Bill Burley intended to exact his pound of flesh, and many times Jerry cursed his obsessing fondness for cards.

"Believe me, if I ever gamble more than five dollars again in my life, at any one time, I hope somebody shoots me!" he grumbled to himself as he headed up the canyon to where he was building "another one of those damned barbed-wire corrals."

For all that Jerry was now doing a full, man-sized day's work, he had one serious weakness. Try as he might, he could not seem to master the art of riding a bucking horse. It was true that by "pinching leather," he could manage—usually—to stay on a bronc during its regular morning "pitching stunt," without which, no range pony seems to think the day is properly started, but, as Rusty had often commented, "When it comes to toppin' a he-hoss, he jest nacher'ly ain't there."

Still, not even Rusty had taken any particular pains to show him any more than the simplest points.

"All you gotta do, Jerry, is jest to keep him between your legs," was about as helpful advice as he had ever received.

On the other hand, Jerry betrayed a surprising aptitude for any and everything that could be done with his hands. He could outshoot any man on the ranch, with the possible exception of Bill Burley, whom he had never seen draw his .45, but, to a man, every puncher on the ranch had repeatedly assured him of Burley's uncanny speed and skill, and, by now, Jerry knew them well enough to appreciate that they were in deadly earnest.

JUST WHAT possessed him to do it, Jerry was never quite able to explain. It may have been because, for once, he was out of sight of any of the Rocking R boys, but instead of going straight up to the end of the blind canyon, where he was building the corral for winter feeding, he took what they called the North Fork. Even to his inexperienced eyes, it was clearly evident that many cattle had been accustomed to going up that way.

The morning was oppressively hot. In fact, it seemed to be becoming increasingly so. Unconsciously, Jerry looked up at the sky. It had taken on a brassy hue, and

as his pony entered the meadow formed by a widening of the gap between the towering canyon walls, he discovered why the cows had been coming up this way. It was carpeted with grass, whose lushness betokened springs, or that water was not far beneath the surface, and he guessed that there must be easily a hundred head in there.

So suddenly that it almost unseated him, Jerry's pony stopped and snorted softly.

"Get along!" Jerry snapped, secretly peeved over his near-tumble. His inability to "ride 'em rough" was a sore spot with him.

With seeming reluctance, the pony started ahead just as the cattle began a more-or-less concerted movement down the canyon. Unaccustomed to range ways, the significance of this was lost upon Jerry. He was far more concerned about the actions of his horse, as its nervousness was increasing rapidly.

A sullen rumble among the towering peaks ahead of him caused Jerry to look up in surprise, for it was his first experience with one of those sudden Arizona thunder storms.

Already, the rugged and serrated pinnacles were shrouded in low-hanging clouds which not only were growing blacker, but were settling down rapidly. The pony was now snorting and fighting the bits in an effort to turn back.

Uneasy, in spite of himself, Jerry looked back, just in time to see the last of the cattle trotting down the canyon to disappear around one of its abrupt bends.

Suddenly, there was a blinding blaze of lightning, and the echoing reverberations of the attendant thunder crash almost knocked Jerry from his saddle. The clouds above him appeared to dip, or bend down, reminding him of how a dusty cobweb sags to the thrust of a stick.

Now beside itself with fright, Jerry's wise little pony planted its feet, "spun on a dime," and hurled Jerry from the saddle, his head striking a rock, and, as he sank into oblivion, his riderless horse fled down the canyon.

A moment later, had Jerry been conscious to hear and feel it, a faint moaning, roaring sound began to fill the air, accompanied by a perceptible trembling of the canyon floor, both increasing steadily in volume and tempo.

IV.

WHAT JERRY had failed to observe in his casual glance at the mounted horseman, after Rusty's departure, was that the rider was Bill Burley, whose rather tight-lipped grin was accompanied by a marked softening of his gray eyes as they followed the beginning of Jerry's descent into the canyon.

"Well, it ain't Texas, but she shore feels like home, hoss," he said quietly to his rangy mount, whose ears twitched knowingly. "Boy, but she shore feels good to be able to talk nacher'l, for a change, an' this here riggin's most good enough for a Texas longhorn-nurse," he added enigmatically, as he inhaled deeply of the sage-scented air.

"Huh!" he grunted, a moment later, as his experienced eye noted the rapidly changing color of the sky, then swung toward the mountain peaks. "Hell! An' he's ridin' plumb into it!" he snapped, swinging his horse toward the canyon and driving home the spurs.

Always of uncertain temper, and outraged at this sudden change in his rider's mood, instead of starting off with the customary alacrity of a

cow pony, Blue Blazes snorted and shot into the air, alighting stiff-legged, only, a split second later, to rebound and swap ends while in mid-air, again hitting the sun-baked earth with a bone-jarring thud that made Burley grunt, just as four of the Rocking R punchers topped a near-by rise.

"Hell's delight!" yelled Shorty McCabe, who was in the lead. "Lookit that jasper ridin' Blue Blazes straight up!"

"I—I'd tell a man!" shouted his three companions as one.

"Dusty!" Shorty called to the man on his right. "Ride like hell an' get between 'em an' that there canyon!"

But both Dusty and his buddy, "Skeets" Saunders, had already acted upon their own initiative, and their ponies were a good ten yards away, nose to nose, ears glued to their necks, as their riders poured the leather into them to accomplish that very purpose.

"Shore—you—ewe-necked—devil! I — had — your — number — long — ago!" rasped Burley, each word punctuated by a pause as the screaming, raging, plunging, sunfishing Blue Blazes resorted to every trick in his long category in a mad effort to unseat the human bur on his back, who seemed, however, to anticipate every move by just that infinitesimal shade necessary to frustrate its effectiveness.

For a good five minutes, the four goggle-eyed, admiring punchers were treated to such an exhibition of horsemanship as is rarely seen, even at the most famous rodeos. Blue Blazes was now utterly crazed with insensate rage, and twice, but for the alert and profanely admiring Dusty and Skeets, undoubtedly would have plunged over the hundred-foot precipice.

It was a glowing tribute to their unbounded admiration for, and confidence in, the ability of Bill Burley that they shouted neither advice nor encouragement during that hectic battle.

Finally, in a last, mad and despairing effort to dislodge Burley, Blue Blazes reared, then threw himself over backward, trying to pin his rider beneath his straining body.

But Bill evidently had been watching for this very move, for he flung himself from the saddle and to one side in time to save himself.

With a grunt, the horse struck the ground, only to scramble wildly back to his feet as Bill again glued himself into the saddle. But Blue Blazes had shot his bolt. He was done, and, for a moment, stood trembling and uncertain.

"Say, Burley!" shouted Shorty, spurring alongside.

FOR THE FIRST time aware of his presence, Bill turned his face toward Shorty, who promptly swallowed his quid of tobacco, and while, for a time, he lost further interest in the mundane affairs taking place about him, it was long before his recollection of that first square look into Burley's face left him.

And small wonder! From Bill's nose, blood was streaming, and from each corner of his mouth a trickle of bright crimson was running down the deep fighting creases in his leathery, dust-grimed face, while his usually clear eyes were now bloodshot, gleaming like blazing rubies in a bright light.

For a moment, Bill regarded the now painfully sick Shorty, who slid limply from his horse, while the sweat from his nausea poured down his graying face.

Breathlessly, the staring-eyed punchers gazed at the tableau, torn

between admiration and awe for Burley, and an almost hysterical desire to laugh at Shorty's efforts to regurgitate his man-sized quid.

Then Bill grinned, and as the tension released, the cowboys burst into paroxysms of uncontrollable laughter, but not before they heard Bill's: "Stay with her, Shorty! Hook your spurs in your cinches or you'll raise your boots!"

One final soul-racking effort, and Shorty sank to his knees, the tears streaming down his ashen face.

"L-laugh, you damned hyenas!" he gasped weakly.

"Boy," chortled Dusty, "you'd better stick to chewin' gum till you gets your growth."

With his bandanna, Burley mopped off his gory face.

"Here, Bill. Better wet it an' wash off your face," offered Skeets, tendering Burley his canteen.

"Yeah, Bill; an' you'd better take a little snort o' this here likker," offered Al Dodge.

"Give it to Shorty," Bill advised with a chuckle, but his eyes, now clearing, softened as he looked at each puncher in turn.

"Shore, Bill, an' here's a plumb clean bandanner. Jest washed her this mornin'," volunteered Dusty.

"Thanks, Dusty. I reckon I done ruined mine. Well——"

A sullen rumble of thunder caused Burley to stop short.

"Hell, fellers, Jerry's rode up the canyon, an' if they's a cloud-burst or an extry heavy rain, he'll shore get caught."

"I misdoubts it'll bother him much where he's workin', Bill," commented Shorty, now sufficiently recovered to remount his horse. "But if he was in that there North Fork, now—well, I don't hone none to get ketched there. I've seen marks where the water's come down there forty-foot-high."

"Awrite, then! You fellers head for the ranch. Me, I'm goin' to mosey up to where he's workin'. Noticed he didn't take no slicker, so I brought an extry one along."

Wheeling the now docile Blue Blazes, Burley swung down the trail into the canyon, and, a few minutes later, arrived where Jerry was supposed to be—but there was no Jerry. Neither was his horse in evidence.

"Now, I just wonder," Burley grumbled, his eyes hardening, and headed back down the canyon just as there came a blinding flash and such a clap of thunder as to deafen him and cause Blue Blazes to stagger.

ONE SWIFT glance at the sky, and Burley set the spurs to his horse, sending him tearing back down the canyon. Just as they reached the V-shaped point where the North Fork branched off, Jerry's riderless horse dashed out and fled blindly down the trail, the empty stirrups flapping wildly against his heaving sides.

With a smothered curse, Burley swung Blue Blazes into the fork, almost precipitating another battle as the mountain-wise horse fought against the bits, but Bill's iron hand and will held him to the course, and the raking spurs drove him ahead.

Burley's face blanched as he heard the first faint echoes of the rumbling roar, growing louder with every leap of the now-lathered Blue Blazes, and then he reached the meadow, just as Jerry, dazed and groggy, struggled to his feet.

A swift glance at the towering walls told the sharp-eyed Burley that there was no possible chance of escape up their perpendicular faces, polished as they were by countless

sand-laden floods from the high hills above them.

In less time than required in its telling, Burley made his decision and, a moment later, swept up to the still-dazed Jerry. As Bill passed, he grabbed Jerry and, by main strength, managed to swing him up behind the saddle, dashing for the lower opening just as the oncoming flood from the cloud-burst swept into the open meadow, less than a quarter of a mile behind them. A fleeting glance back as they entered the narrows ahead showed a wall of water, a good twenty feet high, and already halfway across the narrow meadow, while from the gorge above poured a mighty cascade.

Powerful brute though he was, and mad with terror that lent wings to his feet, the double load slowed down Blue Blazes' speed. With a groan, Burley realized that if they made the fork in the canyon before the roaring flood overtook them, it would be little less than a miracle, and it was a good quarter mile beyond before there would be any possibility of leaving the gorge.

As the bellowing flood struck the walls at the lower end of the meadow, it jarred the ground like an earthquake, and, for the first time, Blue Blazes faltered in his stride, only Burley's superb horsemanship keeping him on his feet.

A bare hundred feet ahead lay the main canyon—fifty—fifteen—ten—five—then the wall of water struck, and as Blue Blazes was swept from his feet, Burley threw himself to the left, dragging Jerry with him.

AMID the chaffing of his cronies, Shorty started to lead them toward the ranch, but another belated spell of sickness caused him to pause for a few minutes. A bit relieved, Shorty again started ahead when the roar of the cloud-burst, high up the side of the mountains, stopped them.

Skeets gasped, as soon as he could make himself heard: "Bill an' Jerry!"

As one, the four wheeled their horses and started back, but, at the upper end of the trail, Shorty halted them.

"We can't do no good down there, an' them floods comes down North Fork, usual. The clouds generally busts on that there scraggly peak, jest where this one done it, so I don't reckon they're in no p'tic'lar danger. Howsomever, we'll wait —— Hell's bells!"

Four underjaws dropped, and four pairs of eyes fairly bulged out of their sockets as Jerry's riderless horse fled past, far below them. Already the roar of the coming torrent was echoing down the canyon, and the ground was beginning to tremble.

"She's comin', hell-bent!" bellowed Skeets, trying to make himself heard above the din.

But if his drawn-faced companions heard, they gave no sign, and a minute later the advance wall of yellow, boiling waters swept around the bend far below them. Then, before their horrified eyes, was one flash of the already-battered body of Blue Blazes as some errant eddy forced it to the top, only to disappear into its ravening maw, almost instantly.

Silently, the four white-faced punchers looked at one another. For once, even the loquacious Skeets could seem to find no words suitable to the occasion, and as they peered back into the canyon, the peak of the flood was thundering past.

For half an hour the four men sat there, mute and heartsick, then

two more of their mates joined them.

"You bozos looks like four old buzzards a-squattin' there. Lookin' for sump'n dead?"

"Bill an' Jerry," Shorty snapped cryptically.

"Hell! You don't mean——"

"You two bozos ride down to the flats where the canyon ends. You'll find what's left of Blue Blazes, when the water's down, an'—an'——"

"Gawd!" ejaculated one of the pair. "Gawd!" he repeated reverently, and, without further comment, he and his companion dashed away.

The peak of the flood passed, the water lowered rapidly, but a good half hour passed, during which Shorty and his companions squatted silently, watching the quickly receding torrent below them. Cigarette after cigarette was rolled, some partly smoked, but equally as many flipped over the bluff unlighted, each maker mechanically starting to build another, too immersed in his gloomy thoughts to be aware of what he was doing.

"'S funny them rannies don't show up," Dusty commented at last.

"Yeah; but mebby they ain't found nothin'. Them floods don't leave much, sometimes," Skeets returned, his face like a mask.

"Me, I'm gonna try ridin' up toward where Jerry was s'posed to be," Shorty informed no one in particular. "They's jest a chance——"

But his companions, seemingly glad for the opportunity to do something—anything, except to sit and watch—were already walking stiffly to where their patient ponies stood with trailing reins.

At the bottom of the trail, after considerable urging, Shorty at last got his snorting horse into the water which came only to his knees, and the others followed, single file.

"We ain't knowed him long," Al mumbled, "but he was shore all he-man, if you asts me. Boy! I ain't never gonna forgit how he rode pore ol' Blue Blazes to a standstill."

"Uh, huh!" grunted Skeets. "An', do you know, I was gettin' to sorta like that there Jerry? I admits, free, he was greener'n hell, an' shore was a bum when he come, but you gotta admit he took his lickin's like a man. That feller had guts, even if he couldn't ride for sour apples."

For the next three or four minutes they slogged along in silence, Shorty still leading. Then they passed the North Fork, down which a sizable stream still flowed. Just beyond there, the rise in the floor of the main canyon took them out of the water, and Shorty set the spurs to his horse, only, a second later, to drag him to such an abrupt halt that, but for the skilled riders they were, the others would have tangled up.

"My good gosh!" Shorty shouted.

"Well, I'll be——" But Dusty was evidently bereft of speech as the four, now silent men, stared unbelievingly at the scene before them.

V.

AS THE WALL of water passed where North Fork entered the main canyon, an instant swirl of backwater caught Bill and Jerry, sweeping them back up the larger gorge.

Now fully recovered, Jerry needed no word from Burley, and the two, now aided, now retarded, by the treacherous eddies, currents, and erratic actions of the madly turbulent flood, alternately waded, stumbled, and splashed, sometimes clinging desperately to rocks to keep from being swept back, until, at last,

they managed to reach a shelving ledge up which they dragged their battered, trembling bodies until they were safe.

Utterly spent, they lay there, gulping air into their straining lungs.

Inexperienced though he was, Jerry needed no one to tell him that he owed his life to this man, whom, above all others, he hated as he had never dreamed any man could hate. He had no way of knowing how long he had been unconscious. For all he knew, in fact, he believed, Burley had been close behind him. Still, he was painfully aware that Bill had saved him, when he could easily have fled and left him to die, and no one would have been any the wiser. He shuddered.

"Next time," Burley grated, "mebby you'll do what you're told. What the hell was you doin' up that canyon?"

For a moment, Jerry glared at Burley. "Just taking a look," he managed to say at last, and could have kicked himself for the inanity of the remark.

He wanted to thank Burley, but something in those frosty, unfriendly eyes caused the words to die in his throat.

"Uh, huh! Well, I hope you got a bellyful," Bill rasped. "An' now you owe me two hundred dollars more for Blue Blazes. That crow-bait you was forkin' wasn't worth four bits, but I'd orta charge you a month's work for him. You're a hell of a man, you are!"

Jerry positively writhed under the biting sarcasm, but, somewhere in the back of his head, something told him that, after all, Burley was only being fair with him.

By now both men were beginning to breathe easier and, dragging themselves to their feet, each proceeded to find himself a seat.

"I—I'm sorry," Jerry mumbled at last, more to break the painful silence than because of any consciousness of what he was saying.

"So was Judas, or that's what he *said*," Burley sneered.

"Say, Burley! I know I owe my life to you, and I'm not grousing for the hell you've dragged me through since I came, but, by Heaven, there's a limit to what I'll take—even from you!"

Bill got to his feet. "Uh, huh! I had an idee that's how you felt about it. Well, this here ledge dips down to dry ground up here a piece, an' if you think you're man enough, foller me, an' then strut your stuff, or else shut your yap." Then, turning his back, he strode away.

WITH A RUSH, Jerry was on his feet, his fists clenched, and in the grip of an almost-ungovernable rage. With every ounce of his will power, he fought down the urge to leap upon Bill Burley and throttle him. The man was positively inhuman. If—if only he'd turn around and face him!

But Burley did not so much as glance behind him, and as Jerry followed, his unreasoning rage cooled, and while his determination to beat Bill into submission never faltered, he could not escape being cognizant of the easy swing of those wide shoulders.

While Burley looked slender, Jerry was suddenly and painfully conscious of the tremendous power of the man. He, Jerry, now weighed a good one hundred and ninety pounds, and yet, from the back of a galloping horse, and with one hand, Burley had snatched him up and swung him behind the saddle.

Jerry felt a sudden chill in his heart—then there flashed across his memory the comforting recollection

of the many times he had beaten stronger men, and his confidence flooded back.

"Here's as good a place as any, I reckon," Burley announced as they left the ledge and entered an area several yards across and free from stones. "If you hones to take off your shirt, hop to it. The water'll be goin' down, an' I aims to get outa here before noon. I got somethin' to do besides dry-nurse a damned bum."

"I'll leave it on," Jerry snapped.

"Awrite! Does you aim to fight accordin' to this here Marcus Queensberry's rules, or does ever'thing go, Mr. Baker? An' I s'pose you hones to shake hands before the hostilities begin," Bill said with such elaborate and affected an air that Jerry's eyes blazed.

"To hell with rules! And when I shake hands, it's with a—— I take that back, Burley. By Heaven, you *are* a man, and I'd like to shake hands!"

"Awrite, fella," and Burley held out his hand.

There's no denying that many a man would have gone to his knees in the bone-crushing grip of either of them.

As they squared away and fell into position, Jerry was conscious of some subtle change in Burley's expression. Somehow, it seemed almost friendly, and Jerry felt a sudden repugnance for this fight.

A lightning-swift jab to his nose and mouth brought the salty taste of blood, reawakening Jerry's original desire, and, with a grin, he side-stepped a stiff swing at his jaw, countering with a left hook to Burley's stomach.

To Jerry's surprise, the blow failed to connect, and a stinging slap from Burley's open palm was a sharp reminder that if he expected to whip this man, he would have to call upon every particle of his skill and experience.

Jerry feinted with his left and, with seemingly the same motion, drove a smoking right into Burley's midriff.

Bill grinned. "That's a good one, Jerry. You gotta show me how it's done, sometime," he said, dancing skillfully away from a swift uppercut.

"An' now, I reckon I'll have to show *you* somethin'," Burley said easily, his right hand streaking for Jerry's solar plexus, but his left smashing into Jerry's eye and making him see a celestial display as Jerry whipped across a sizzling right that landed on the top of Bill's head as he ducked.

Then followed a dazzling succession of feints and footwork that would have sent a crowd of fight fans into a frenzy. Try as he might, Jerry could find no opening in Burley's guard, all at once realizing that he was up against a no-less-skilled boxer than himself.

Suddenly, Burley's jaw was wide open, and, with every ounce of his strength, Jerry swung for it; then the sky fell upon him and, between that and the rising earth, his last conscious thought was that he was being crushed to a pulp.

IN OPEN-MOUTHED wonder, the four punchers drank in the spectacle, but, even as they looked, the end came with startling swiftness. They saw Jerry lunge forward, then sail into the air as Burley's fist took him on the button with a crack that was plainly audible to them.

"Hey! Skeets! Bring me your canteen. I think he's plumb out," Burley shouted.

Then, with a yell, the four spurred forward.

Five minutes later, Jerry listened confusedly to what sounded like a meaningless jargon about him. Then he smelled raw whisky as Al spilled a little in trying to force it past Jerry's clenched teeth.

With an effort that took all his strength, Jerry lifted a leaden hand and shoved aside the bottle. "Thanks, Al," he mumbled through his aching jaws, and trying to control his swirling senses. "I'm off of that stuff for life."

"Well, she's dang good likker," Al assured him, taking a stiff swallow himself.

Dusty and Skeets helped Jerry to his feet and supported him until he was able to stagger over to a boulder and sit down.

"We didn't have no referee, Jerry," Burley said as he walked up to where Jerry was holding his pounding temples in his shaking hands; "but I timed it, an' you was out five minutes. Howsomever, if you hones to carry on, I'll have Shorty do the refereein'."

Struggling to his feet, Jerry stuck out his hand. "Nope," he said, grinning weakly; "I've had enough. Man, oh, man," he exclaimed ruefully, "but you sure do pack a wallop!"

"You ain't so bad yourself, Jerry," Burley complimented him, at the same time taking Jerry's hand and shaking it warmly. "Boy, you dang nigh had me worried for a minute there when you worked that double shift on me. You almost pretty nigh knocked the wind outa me."

VI.

AS JERRY entered upon the seventh month of his enforced servitude, the trials of the passing months gave place to the more hideous dilemma which confronted him. He was pledged to commit a murder, and, no matter what his other shortcomings, Jerry Baker came from a stock whose word, once definitely given, was as good as a fact accomplished.

His pledge must be redeemed within the month. Nor was he blind to the fact that, in carrying out his commission, he would forfeit the hard-earned good will of the punchers, whose friendship had been developing rapidly ever since his fight with Burley.

To his credit, the idea of trying to escape it had not occurred to him, but, heretofore, he had always thrust the ugly fact into the background as something in the dim future.

Now that the time for action was at hand, it began to prey upon his mind, and an unaccustomed grimness came about the set of his mouth —a flinty hardness quite unlike his normal expression, and which, had he but known it, had not escaped his sharp-eyed companions.

The Sunday night of the second week of Jerry's last month of grace arrived.

"Burley, I'd like two days off."

"Nothin' doin'. Why, you haven't more'n half worked out your debt. You just want to get drunk again. Besides, you ain't been worth more'n ten, twelve dollars a month."

For a fleeting moment, Jerry felt his temper start to rise. During the past two months, to his surprise, instead of maintaining the friendly attitude he had evinced immediately after the rescue and their fight, Burley had become an even more severe taskmaster. At times, Jerry had the feeling that having whipped him in a fair fight, Burley was merely bulldozing him.

"But it's important. I'm not going to town, and I won't get drunk."

"Yeah?" Burley drawled insultingly. "That's what they all say. No. You don't get off this here ranch while you owes me money, an' that's whatever."

There was no question as to the absolute finality in Burley's voice, and Jerry realized the uselessness of pressing the matter further.

During the ensuing week, Jerry made up his mind. He had made a wreck of his life. Now that he looked back at it sanely, in his austere way, Judson Sperry had been fair with him—more than fair—repeatedly helping him out of jams and disgraceful scrapes.

True, he had, at last, exacted a terrible price, and Jerry felt a sullen resentment at the thought. But he had made the bargain, and the least he could do now was to make good his pledge.

IT WAS FOUR o'clock Monday morning when Jerry led his saddled horse away from the Rocking R, until he felt secure from discovery. Then he mounted and headed for the Bee-in-a-Box, twenty miles away. What he did not know, however, was that as he was climbing into the saddle for his trip, a man at the Rocking R was saddling their fastest horse, a moment later, taking up his trail.

As soon as this second rider appeared satisfied as to Jerry's destination, he wheeled his horse and headed into the hills on the run.

The thoughts that passed through Jerry's mind during that lonely ride were bitter, and it was a stony-faced Jerry Baker who, after following the roundabout trail he had been shown, rode into the Bee-in-a-Box about eight o'clock that morning.

Perhaps nothing could better illustrate the caliber of the inner man that was now his than the iron determination which drove him on. And yet, as he dismounted, he was sick with the horror of what he was about to do.

Many times, he almost convinced himself that the owner of the Bee-in-a-Box must be deserving of the death that he, Jerry Baker, had been sent to inflict upon him. Rusty's words returned to him with added significance. Still, mixed with his determination to fulfill his pledge was a growing rebellion against the bargain that he had made.

As Jerry swung down from the saddle, his horse was between him and the house. For a moment, he stood resting his throbbing head upon the hand still grasping the pommel of his saddle—and in that instant he knew that he could not go through with it. He could not kill in cold blood.

A swift glance about him revealed no one in sight. Believing that he was unobserved, he drew his gun, removed its shells, and thrust it, empty, back into its holster. As he did so, a shadowy form disappeared from a back window of the house, but Jerry did not see it. Then he drank in a great breath of the sage-laden air. For the first time since his interview with Judson Sperry, he felt that he could look the world in the eye.

With head erect, Jerry left his pony and stepped upon the porch. Only a slight pallor showed that he fully realized what he was about to do. Yes; he would redeem his pledge—but only to the extent that he would state his mission, thus putting the man upon his guard against another like attempt, tell him to draw, then die with a clean slate.

Before Jerry was halfway across the porch, the door of the house opened, and, framed in the doorway, stood—Bill Burley.

FOR ONE breathless second, Jerry could scarcely credit his own eyes. Could it be that Burley——

"What're you doin' here?"

Burley's eyes were icy, and his hand, fingers spread like the talons of a hawk, hovered just above the butt of his gun as he interrupted Jerry's speculations.

"I want to see the owner of this ranch."

"What do you want to see him for?"

"That's my affair, Burley."

"Yeah? Well, since you're here, come on in."

Jerry followed him into the big but dusty and littered room.

"Do you know the owner, Baker?" demanded Burley suddenly.

"Never saw him. Don't even know his name, but I have an important message for him."

As Jerry spoke, for the first time, Burley smiled into his drawn face—a sort of derisive smile, or so it seemed to Jerry.

"Awrite! Just wait here a minute."

Then turning toward a Navajo blanket hanging on the wall, Burley lifted it and disappeared, only to return, a moment later, dropping the blanket into place behind him.

"Awrite!" he announced. "Go on in."

With his mouth as dry as ashes, Jerry obeyed, his outstretched hand trembling slightly as it grasped and pulled aside the blanket. Then he stopped, and his jaw dropped.

He was facing a shallow closet, at the back of which stood a full-length mirror, and for one unbelieving minute Jerry's straining eyes bored into those of his own reflected image, the cold sweat coursing down his face.

"There you are, Jerry. You're face to face with him. Now strut your stuff," and Burley chuckled mirthlessly.

"W-what—is this your idea of a joke, Burley?"

"Nope. Jud Sperry's. Read this." He handed Jerry a sealed envelope.

With trembling fingers, Jerry tore it open, and as he removed the following note in Judson Sperry's crabbed handwriting, a slip of blue-tinted paper fluttered unheeded to the floor:

> DEAR JERRY: When you read this, you will have killed the old owner of the Bee-in-a-Box—once your father's—and the new one will be standing in his boots. I inclose my check for three thousand dollars, as agreed.
>
> JUDSON SPERRY.

FOUR DAYS later, Judson Sperry and Tim Harahan sat in Sperry's office while Sperry read a letter aloud:

> "DEAR SPERRY: I suppose likely you think we're all dead.
>
> "This morning, Jerry did his stuff like a man—and with an empty gun. That boy has guts, and if you don't set him up in business and give him both ranches to run, don't call me your friend.
>
> "Tell Tim thanks.
>
> "HANK ELLISON, *alias* BILL BURLEY."

" 'Tis a cheap price for friendship, Jud," Tim remarked quietly, and Sperry blew his nose loudly as he nodded his full agreement.